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Letters to the Editor

Response to "Those Jews...Again...and Again"

I was very interested in the new Journal of Translation and gratified that I could read it online. Thank you for this great service.

I was especially interested in the article "Those Jews...Again...and Again" (Volume 1.1). May I humbly present some of my concerns regarding the translation of the term "the Jews"?

The suggested translation bears on the question of "Who Is a Jew?" It is critical that our Bible translations of the term express the identity originally intended by the Holy Spirit if these Scriptures are to be properly applied today. The problem is to distinguish "the Jews" who persecuted and killed Christ from "other Jews." In order to do this, it is necessary to understand the historical context of the New Testament usage.

The racially identifiable Jews of the New Testament era included several sects, as the article points out, among which were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Christians. After the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, only the sects of the Pharisees and the Christians survived, and, in fact, the Pharisees were disbanded and dispersed until about AD 90 when Rabbi ben Zakkai gathered other Rabbis, principally from the Pharisees, at Jamnia (sometimes spelled 'Yabneh) to reorganize around their "oral law."[1] The Pharisees professed to believe that the "oral law" was equal or superior to the written law of Moses.[2] During the next three or four hundred years they collected these oral traditions and committed to writing what is now known as the Mishnah and the Talmud. They now consider these writings as their official, authoritative scriptures, along with many other writings and interpretations based upon them.[3]

Their "oral law" was the source of their doctrinal conflicts with Christ. At one point Christ gave a clear statement of His opinion of their teachings: "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves" (Matthew 23:15).

The destruction in AD 70 resulted in the end of the Jewish race and nation as it had previously existed. The official records of the genealogies were all burned except the Bible, many families were destroyed from the war and the consequent dispersion into slavery. Jerusalem, which had been the center of their national identity, was destroyed. Their government and religious institutions were destroyed. Even the Rabbis had to confess that "the Kingdom of God is not of this world."

In our relationship to those who call themselves "Jews" today, we must understand that their professed identity does not depend upon their racial consanguinity to Abraham, but upon their relationship to those who adhere to the "oral law," the Mishnah, Talmudim and consequent writings. The question of "Who Is A Jew?" was debated in the Knesset and, for the laws of the State of "Israel," was finally decided in accordance with the Talmud, that a "Jew" was anyone

born of a Jewish mother, or one converted to "Judaism" (providing they had not later converted to Christianity).[4] The "Jewishness" of the mother was determined by whether or not she had been born of a Jewish mother or converted according to the determination of their Rabbis. In other words, today's "Jews" are proselytes and descendants of proselytes with no official, legitimate claim to descent from Abraham.[5] The correct Biblical identity of these people is "Pharisees."[6]

After the resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Christian sect took the name "Christian" and the Pharisees retained the name "Jews." The Christian doctrines were vindicated and the Pharisees' were discredited because the teachings of Jesus had been proven true by the very destruction of Jerusalem itself. After this clear separation, the references to "the Jews" indicate the Pharisees as enemies of Christ and His Church.

I appreciate the effort to be sensitive to the feelings and human rights of those calling themselves "Jews." Like Paul, I say: *"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved."* However, it will not do to change the Scriptures in order to try to convert them to Christianity. It is not "dehumanizing His fellow Jews" to tell them the truth concerning the historical development of their religion, by which they are now identified. It is a historical and Biblical fact that those following the doctrine of the Pharisees killed Christ. As the article points out, it was not the racial group as a whole. Peter said that they killed Christ: "Him [Christ], being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). Paul said that they killed Christ: "Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men" (1 Thes. 3:15). Are we to alter these Scriptures in order to not offend those following this false religious doctrine? That would make the Word of God of no effect, for we would then be required, in fairness, to alter the Word not to offend Muslims, Buddhists, etc., etc. These religions are often falsely identified with a racial group, whereas, in fact, they are a false doctrine. In fact, all sinners would have to be considered, for the Word of God is offensive to sinners in general.

The proposal to translate "the Jews" as "the Jewish leaders," "the authorities," "the people," "the crowd," "a fellow Jew," etc., all of these designations and descriptive terms do not accurately reflect the true identity of these people. "The leaders," "the crowd," "the people," "a fellow Jew," do not clearly show that it was those who follow the doctrines of the Pharisees that were intended. The Pharisees were the leaders, the authorities, and were followed by many of the people, the crowds. They were the ones in power in Judea. It is the fact that the teachings of these Pharisees were what blinded the people and turned them from the truth of Christianity, not their racial identity, nor their geographic location. Since Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, this doctrine was the impediment to their eternal destiny. And still is!

The Scriptures give us a direct and definite definition of "Who Is A Jew?" (Romans 2:28, 29). The entire Book of Romans is an extended discourse on how to distinguish the real Israel from the false one. Paul pleads for the Church to offer salvation and equality in Christ to all, not to fail to evangelize anyone, even though they are enemies of the Gospel: "As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes" (Romans 11:28). Then in 12:1, Paul urges the Christians to evangelize these Pharisees

even though they may be killed for doing so: “Therefore ... present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.” This isn’t a hate message, nor anti-Semitism. This is the love of God that Christianity alone is able to exhibit.

Very similar to the “Who Is a Jew?” question is: “Who Is Israel?” Paul clearly defines the question when he says: “... they are not all Israel which are of Israel” (Romans 9:6). He goes on to distinguish between the “Israel of God” and the “Israel of the flesh.” The “Israel of God” are the elect, the heirs of the promise, etc. In Galatians 3 and 4 he explains the Scriptural distinction between the two contenders. He puts it very concisely in Galatians 3:29: “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” It is not Scriptural to call any nation “Israel” except those in Christ. It is not Scriptural to grant anyone the right to the promises except those in Christ. Christ is THE HEIR of all things (Hebrews 1:2).

Similarly, it is an error to call those “Christians” who do not live and act in the spirit of Christ. For example, we should not call the Crusades of the Middle Ages “Christian Crusades,” neither should we say that the “Church” persecuted and killed the “Jews” in the World War II era. Neither of these acts was in the spirit of Christ. Neither should the true Christians accept responsibility for the atrocities against the “Jews” of all past ages. We need to sort out our vocabulary and usage of these terms, not change the Scriptures to try to atone for the wrongs of any particular group. It is only setting the scene for more persecution of the true Church to attribute to them the sins of those “who call themselves Christians but are not.”

I want to thank the author for addressing a very vital issue that is not only confusing to new readers of the Scriptures but also to many seasoned theologians who study theology instead of history—and also for bringing it to the attention of all those wonderful people who translate the Scriptures.

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Footnotes

[1] H. L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, trans. and edited by Markus Bockmuehl (second printing), pp 1–5 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

[2] Babylonian Talmud Tractate Gittin, Folio 60: “R. Johanan said: God made a covenant with Israel only for the sake of that which was transmitted orally, as it says, *For by the mouth of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel.”*

[3] Rabbi Louis Finklestein, longtime head of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, in The Jews—Their Hisory, Culture and Religion, Vol. 4, p. 1,332 (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949) says:

“The Talmud derives its authority from the position held by the ancient academies (i.e., Pharisee). The teachers of those academies, both of Babylonia and of Palestine, were considered the rightful successors of the older Sanhedrin…. At the present time, the Jewish people have no

living central authority comparable in status to the ancient Sanhedrins or the later academies. Therefore, any decision regarding the Jewish religion must be based on the Talmud, and the final resumé of the teaching of those authorities, when they existed."

Jacob Neusner, in Judaism: The Classical Statement: The Evidence of the Bavli (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), calls the Bavli (that is, the Babylonian Talmud) "the ultimate authority of Judaism" (p. xv). Again,

"…we seek a theory of the Bavli so as to grasp the Bavli's position in the end of the formation of the canon, that is, of Judaism. We want to define that position so as to understand how the Bavli forms the seal of Judaism. In what ways is the Bavli the full and complete statement of the Torah of Moses, our rabbi, the authority, the final judgment, the summa? For Judaism, from the Bavli onward, always looked to the Bavli as the ultimate statement of affairs." (p. 139)

[4] Israel Shahak, Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of Three Thousand Years (London: Pluto Press, 1994), pp. 4–5.

[5] Fast, Howard, The Jews (New York: Dial Press, 1968).

"…ethnically Jew and Greek were apparently inseparable. (I have avoided the entire question of race, firstly because mankind is as mixed as an old fruit pudding, and secondly because racial designation is less a science than a tool of bigotry." (p. 171)

"The living people of the Mediterranean today are indistinguishable physically from the Jews among them…." (p. 172)

"By the tenth century, we hear no more of the Samaritans in the Diaspora. They have become Jews or Christians." (p. 175)

"Not only language, but history and culture connected the Jews in Spain with the East; and so ancient is the Jewish connection with Spain that if one is to talk of blood–a method of identification I consider rather nonsensical–one would have to say that there is Jewish blood in all Spaniards or Spanish blood in all Sephardic Jews." (p. 179)

"[Of the Phoenicians and the northern tribes of Israel, the "Beni-Yisrael"] ... these Beni-Yisrael people became indistinguishable from the Jews. They had a natural affinity for each other, and... by the time of Jesus tribal records ceased to be kept and Jews no longer made any distinction in tribal ancestry, except for the Levites." (p. 180)

"[The four or five thousand Jews expelled from England]…perhaps twice that many lived in Cornwall and Devon and were simply absorbed into the population, as happened so often in the Mediterranean area and the Levant." (p. 248)

"[In Scandinavian countries]… The rate of intermarriage was the highest in western Europe…. In Sweden, where Jewish-Christian intermarriage has probably been higher than any other place in Europe, one can find only the statistics of the handful of Jews who remain synagogue-

connected…. Jews who went to Sweden became Swedes, and a study of this would be most interesting." (p. 249)

"(If the question is asked here: what is a Jew, and how does he cease to be a Jew and become a Swede, and why has not the same process happened in America?—the answer is hardly as mysterious as it sounds. Since the Jewish people began a sizable number of them have ceased to be Jews at any given moment in history. This is a process. Where the conditions are possible for voluntary assimilation of Jews, they will assimilate, and where the Jews are only a sprinkling among friendly people, they will tend to assimilate more easily. But all Jews never assimilate, only a part of them, and this assimilation can be of various degrees. Some assimilation leads to Christianity, other assimilation does not. Some assimilation is through intermarriage, and again some is through a sort of ethnic forgetfulness, and some is a desire for status, for integration." (pp. 249–50)

[6] John Bright, A History of Israel, Second Edition(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972):

"Whither, then, the history of Israel?…The way actually taken was the only one left open; it was that pointed out by the Pharisee, the way that led to normative Judaism, to the Mishnah and the Talmud…. To the Jew, therefore, Old Testament theology finds its fruition in the Talmud.

".... Israel's history leads straight on to the Talmud—or the gospel. It has in fact led in no other direction." (pp. 466–467)